



Statement

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By International Crisis Group

Saving the Central African Republic's Elections and Averting Another Cycle of Violence

The Central African Republic is beset with fresh violence days before voting slated for 27 December. If the election is to go forward, and the country to avoid further turmoil, neighbouring heads of state will need to help rival politicians strike a deal.

Fighting has broken out in the western Central African Republic (CAR) days before national elections, as a coalition of armed groups fight government and UN forces just 150km from the capital Bangui. The violence comes following a major spike in political tensions exacerbated by the decision of the country's Constitutional Court to block former President Francois Bozizé from running in elections scheduled to take place on 27 December. The UN mission in the country, deployed since 2014, has stepped up military operations in support of the government, and additional foreign forces have arrived to assist. But it is unclear if the intervention will be enough to stem the armed groups' advance or allow polls to proceed peacefully. Regional leaders should push President Faustin-Archange Touadéra and Bozizé into talks if the country is to have any chance of holding the election and averting yet more violence and turmoil.

CAR has witnessed continuous fighting of varying intensity for decades and has been in a protracted crisis since 2013. In that year, a mostly Muslim rebel coalition known as

the Seleka from the country's north east rose against Bozizé's government and briefly held power until regional countries pushed it to stand down. Non-Muslim "anti-balaka" forces sprang up to defend non-Muslims against the Seleka's predation. Since this crisis, both former Seleka and anti-balaka factions have splintered, while new ones have formed. These armed groups have been responsible for widespread insecurity across the country as they battle each other and government forces for turf and influence. A 2019 peace deal that fourteen armed factions signed only went some way toward curbing violence, even before the latest outbreak. Armed groups have grown increasingly impatient at what they see as the government's failure since 2019 to implement parts of the agreement, including integrating their fighters into special mixed brigades. They have also voiced growing opposition to the Touadéra government itself.

Political tensions in CAR had been running high for months, but they ratcheted up again on 3 December when the Constitutional Court ruled that Bozizé, who returned to CAR in 2019 after years in exile, could not run in elections. The court justified its ruling on the basis that the former president, who seized power in a coup in 2003, is under UN sanctions and subject to a government-issued arrest warrant for his alleged role in murders, kidnapping, arbitrary detention and torture. These accusations

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(all of which Bozizé denies) concern events that occurred while he was in office and also after he was overthrown. News emerged soon after the court’s decision that Bozizé was meeting some of his political supporters in his home prefecture of Ouham in the west. Meanwhile, he also met with three leaders of armed groups, two anti-balaka and one former Seleka that had been part of the coalition that had ousted him in 2013. In response, Touadéra’s government accused Bozizé of seeking to destabilise the country.

As the election date drew near, several armed groups entered the fray in what now looks like an attempt to halt the elections and depose Touadéra. On 15 December, a coalition of six of the largest and most well-equipped armed groups, including both ex-Seleka and anti-balaka factions, issued a communiqué lambasting what they insisted were shoddy electoral preparations. These groups had previously been signatories of the February 2019 peace agreement but now declared their intent to cease all cooperation with the government. While their communiqué expressed no overt support for Bozizé, it was signed in the town of Kamba Kota, not far from the former president’s political stronghold. On 18 and 19 December, they took over swathes of Lobaye, Ouham, Ouham Pende, Nana Gribizi, Ombella M’Poko and Ouaka prefectures, blocking the principal supply routes into Bangui. In a further declaration, they called for armed popular insurrection and proclaimed their intention to march on the capital.

International actors have now stepped in, but it is still unclear whether they will succeed in repelling the attackers and ensuring that elections can go ahead. Russia and Rwanda have sent hundreds of troops to CAR, especially to Mbaiki (the capital of Lobaye prefecture) at the government’s request. UN forces (especially Portuguese and Rwandan contingents)

and the national army have meanwhile been fighting the rebels in the west and south of the country around Bossombele (Ombella M’Poko prefecture) and Bossemptele (Ouham Pende prefecture). The fighting could continue past the election date, jeopardising the polls. If the vote cannot go ahead, and a new president and national assembly positions are not filled before all terms end on 31 March 2021, Touadéra’s rivals would almost certainly oppose extending his tenure. With no clear path toward instituting an interim government, the country would be vulnerable to more elite infighting.

Given that decisive victory over the armed groups is unlikely in the coming days, mediation is required to calm things down in time for the polls. The president and his supporters insist that they will not be bullied into delaying the election or allowing Bozizé to run this time, but they may have incentives to offer the former president that might, in turn, persuade the armed groups to stand down. Notably, the authorities could cease their harassment of Bozizé and members of his family who have suffered physical intimidation and arrest; lift the arrest warrants out for him and his associates; and discuss the possibility that he and his party might return to political competition in the future. While these options may be unpalatable for many of CAR’s citizens, the alternative, which may involve more violence, would be worse.

Regional heads of state, including that of Angola, which occupies the presidency of the commission of the Economic Community of Central African States, and Congo-Brazzaville, which has historically been the lead mediator in CAR’s crises and has influence over the country’s political opposition, may need to weigh in. They should persuade Touadéra to accede to such talks and they should convince Bozizé that at present he cannot expect more than the incentives outlined above. The African Union,

a guarantor of the 2019 peace agreement, could provide technical support for any dialogue. The alternative for Touadéra might be widespread rebellion, which could either render the country ungovernable for his second term or even one day overthrow him. The alternative for Bozizé might be military defeat and referral to the International Criminal Court. In addition, these and other international guarantors should convene a meeting between the government and

the armed groups to redouble efforts to implement the 2019 peace agreement, a core demand of all the fourteen armed groups that signed it.

The offers above might be hard to stomach for many in Bangui, but with the UN spread over such a wide area and the national armed forces still weak, they may be the only way to ensure that the polls can take place on time and fairly peacefully and that the country can be spared another dangerous cycle of violence.